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## ETHICAL VALUE OF PAGAN RELIGIONS.

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In treating the subject here proposed it is quite unnecessary to dwell, even by way of preliminary, upon the well-known character of pagan morality. That picture which, at a time when paganism was the dominant moral force in the world, when it was both at its best and at its worst, was sketched by a Christian apostle, stood then, as it stands to-day, unimpeached in its truth to the revolting original. Over against this, however, is found the remarkable fact that pagan teaching has always contained so much that commends itself to the Christian intelligence, approaching often, and sometimes even rivaling, at least in the estimation of many, the moral teaching of Christianity itself. Thus it comes to pass that we see in the ethics of paganism much of that same contrast between the moral theory and the moral practice which is found in nominal Christianity. It might, indeed, seem at first open to one who denies the superiority of Christianity among religions, to ask, Wherein, after all, are Christian nations, or is even Christianity as a moral system, really different at this point of view from pagan nations, or from paganism?

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One might reply that when all in this direction has been admitted which the actual fact demands of us, still the practical morality of Christendom, when at its worst, is so much superior to that of paganism when at its best, that really no rational comparison can be instituted between them. It is under Christian, and not pagan, auspices that the life of the modern world has been molded and inspired. It is the Bible, and not any pagan philosophy, which has fixed those standards of morality in the light of which Christians themselves are so often called to account by worldly men, and which condemn them when they are found wanting. The Christian family, social Christian life, the Christian nationality, even where these are only nominally Christian, and have been shaped by Christian influence unconsciously to themselves—has there ever been a time when in any part of the pagan world these were even approached in moral excellence and efficiency for the promotion of human happiness; even when full account is taken of those faults which are incident to all things human?

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The question, however, which underlies all matters of historical fact in these particulars, or of present experience and observation, is what we are here to deal with. What of good result in the particular now considered do we find *possible* to paganism, taking it at its best? We must in studying its history make those same allowances on the ground of the faults and failures of human nature upon which we insist when Christianity is in a like way brought to the test. After these allowances have been made, how does the case stand? Is pagan morality found, whether in its religion or in its philosophy, even capable of answering the moral ends of either philosophy or religion? It is at this point of view that we are to study it now.

What we have first to notice here is the fact that the ethical value of a religion or of a philosophy cannot be accurately estimated by its preceptive element. It is at this point, in very large measure, that paganism and Christianity are thought susceptible of comparison, the one with the other. And at this point such comparison may be allowed. Since Christianity covers the whole field of morals; since the wisdom of inspiration has anticipated the moral needs of our human nature at every point; and since, as is the fact, the Bible has a lesson, or a warning, or an encouragement, or a restraint for every moral exigency conceivable in the life of a human being—since this is so, the moral teachings of other religions, if there be any truth or any good in them, will show points of resemblance to the moral teachings of *this* religion. So far, then, as preceptive morality is concerned, let it be granted that, up to a certain limit, fixed by the fact that in its preceptive morality paganism covers only a small part of human life and action, and even within this narrow bound is often at fault in its own teachings—up to this limit let it be granted that comparisons may be made. The adequate and conclusive test of ethical value is, after all, not here.

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There are three reasons why simply the preceptive part of a religion cannot be regarded as conclusive of its value, either as religion or as morality. One of these is that precept, like law in general, is of value chiefly as it is representative of what is deeper in the heart of things, and mightier in itself than precept alone can ever be. Precept, like law, may be “a dead letter.” It is always so, in fact, save as in the individual, the society, or the nation, there is a *conscience* which both endorses and enforces it. What effect did the philosophy of Plato have in staying the moral decline of the Greek people? or the philosophy of Cicero, or Seneca, in staying that of the Romans? What reason have we to suppose that the occasional high tone of moral precept in oriental religions ever really influenced the character or life of oriental nations? It is as when, in any country, laws are adopted far in advance of the reigning public sentiment or intelligence, so that they stand on the statute-book as representative of ideals, not of actualities.

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Another reason to a like effect is that the value of precept, even where it is abstractly good, depends so much upon the motive. We may recall in this connection a precept, on its face much like one of Paul himself, which Prof. Mahaffy in his “Social life in Greece” quotes from “the gentle Menander,” as he calls him. “Prefer to be injured,” is a translation of the passage in Menander, “rather than to injure, for in so doing you will blame others, and you will escape censure.” Upon this Prof. Mahaffy comments by saying: “If he had not promised us the luxury of blaming others, the sentiment would have been thoroughly Christian.” What Paul says, apparently, but only apparently, to a like effect, is in one place in his epistle to the Romans, where mention is made of the coals of fire on an enemy’s head. If any one were to interpret this language of Paul in any sense of requital for injury done, or any selfishness of motive whatever, he would commit himself to the absurdity of either maintaining that the way to be revenged upon an enemy is to feed him when hungry and give him drink when thirsty; or to that of holding that when thus overcoming evil with good, as mentioned in the connection, one is in some way serving himself. In truth, that saying of Paul, which to a certain extent bears such a likeness to the passage in Me-

nander, enjoins a duty which in its motive puts self out of the account altogether, and looks alone to the good of even an enemy. For the "coals of fire" are neither more nor less than just that consciousness of being in the wrong, and shame and repentance on account of it, to which forbearance of this nature may often bring a man, and which are the best that even a man's warmest friends could wish for him when he either does or contemplates a wrong action. This case may illustrate the whole attitude of paganism on the one hand and Christianity on the other as respects the motive annexed to precept. The very highest motive to virtue which paganism any where proposes is the *advantage* of virtue. Does any one need to be reminded how infinitely inferior, at the point of view of ethical worth or value, this is to that motive which makes either *duty* or *charity* the law of life for a Christian man?

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This leads to a notice of the third reason why the preceptive element alone is no test of the ethical value of either a religion, or of the morality it enjoins. Precept must be enforced by some adequate *sanction*, or there is very little of practical force to be expected in it. Behind law there is the authority which enjoins the law. The precepts of pagan philosophy, so far as they are good, are simply good advice—nothing more. So much of reverence as may be felt for the teacher, so much of sanction this good advice has; and this, as a moral force, is feeble at the strongest, and is even felt only by those who in some way are in more or less direct relation with the person of the teacher. If it be a precept in pagan religion, what value can it have when the gods whom this religion teaches men to adore are themselves incarnations, not of virtue, but of vice? When the God of the Christian says, "Be ye holy, for I am holy," there is an awful emphasis in the words that lends availing sanction to every precept of the religion which adores the great God as a holy being.

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It is not, then, in the precepts of a religion that we are to find either its authority as a religion, or its ethical value as such. This element may exist in it simply in virtue of the fact that some great teacher has infused it here and there with right thoughts on fundamental themes; and it may exist there as practically inert or inoperative, so as to make it worthless to any real result in the interest of morality.

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Closely related to the proposition sustained on these three several grounds is this other: That the inculcation of specific virtues, however just and true so far as it goes, does not of itself suffice in giving value to either a religion or a philosophy. We may take as an illustration the virtue of filial piety as enjoined in the teachings of Confucius. That filial piety, in the sense in which we commonly use the phrase, is eminently beautiful and eminently salutary in its influence on human character and in human life, no one can doubt. No religion enjoins it with stronger emphasis than does the religion of the Bible. There are even some things in the Chinese conception and use of it which appeal strongly to our human feeling in this regard. Something pleasing may be in the thought that at family festivals those who seem to be absent because dead are not so really, that places reserved for those who once were present are still filled, though with forms unseen; and there may be something pleasing, again, in the offering

of flowers and fruits set before the vacant seat, as if it were possible for these invisible guests to share in the entertainment. There may be something salutary in the belief that between the living and the dead there is only an apparent separation, and in the desire to so act on all occasions as that the dead parent may still approve the acts of the living child. But when all this grows into a worship, and becomes in the religion a feature so prominent as to characterize it, and to degrade its ritual into a tissue of trifling ceremonials, while the proper object of worship is left out of view, perhaps scarcely even known ;—when all this follows, the virtue of which so much is made in Chinese morality, and of which the Chinese sacred books have so much to say, becomes a delusion and a vice. The authorities tell us that Confucius, though he favored the practice of ancestral worship, finding it already in existence, as it had been for many centuries, was distrustful of its tendency. He tried to guard it by such teaching as that there could be no virtue in reverence for the dead while duties to the living were neglected or despised. But the result, in Chinese religion and Chinese morality, shows that simply the inculcation of a virtue does not suffice to make a people virtuous even in that which is thus enjoined. So with the virtue of temperance in all things, and self-control, which in oriental religions in a like way grows into the deformities of ascetic self-immolation. To all which may be added the general truth that while specific virtues are included in morality, yet morality, in any adequate meaning of the word, is virtue itself.

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And this is very much the same thing as to say that what is the test of ethical value in any religion is the kind of *character* it tends to produce. We will say character in two respects, average character and ideal character. The second should be noticed first, since the ideal character in any religion must powerfully influence average character. To some extent the ideal of character in a religion may be seen in that which is attributed to the deity that is worshiped. It should seem that the conception any people may have of what is best in humanity may always be inferred from what is regarded as proper to deity. The mythology of a people, in fact, indicates its apprehension of what belongs to the highest being. The ideal of character is also seen in those whom pagan teaching and pagan literature set forth as ideal men. This is especially the case where the ideal man is the teacher himself, standing to his disciples in much the same relation, perhaps, as Jesus of Nazareth to those whom he taught. A conspicuous example is Buddha. Those who in these days and in enlightened lands so unaccountably show a tendency to accept the founder of the Buddhist faith as both an ideal teacher and an ideal man, must be strangely blinded. Let us take him just as the books picture him to us. The way in which he is represented as entering upon his career illustrates the fatal fallacy of his whole system. Does a man born to be the ruler of a people owe nothing to them? Is not his life-work provided for him in the very fact of being so born? Then Buddha had other ties; ties with wife and child; ties with the father and the mother whose only son and heir he was. Is it, after all, such a charming thing in him that he casts off all these and goes roaming over the world a barefooted beggar, preaching his gospel of *nirvana*? The story can be told in poetry so as to be very pleasing; but apply to it those tests which are afforded in the hard facts of human life and human duty, and what does it all become? The ideal Buddha affords in his own person is one which, if it were to be used in this world for other than poetical purposes, would take men

everywhere out of their spheres of duty and service ; would make all manly virtues a crime ; would change the world's workers into puling, whimpering ascetics ; would make religion itself a mask for selfishness, and morality the carcass of a dead dog. Buddha's boast was, " I am no man's servant." Jesus said, " If any man would be great among you, let him be the servant of all."

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How distrustful the best men among pagan teachers have shown themselves of the effect of such ideals as the pagan mythology affords, is well known. Plato, for example, " was of opinion," says Döllinger, " that in a well-ordered state the histories of the battles of the gods, of Hera's captivity, of the pushing of Hephaestus down from heaven, should neither be admitted with allegorical explanation or without." He would have the mythology of his people " purged ;" but we may well ask, What would remain of that mythology, after, as he suggests, all that is undignified and morally hurtful had been purged away ? If this is true of a mythology which has been a chief inspiration in some of the noblest poetry the world has, in so far as transcendency of genius is concerned, how must the case have been with those worshiping deities supposed to take delight in human sacrifice, in the murder of infants, in debaucheries and cruelties such as we cannot even name ? How must it have been with those people along the Nile by whom the supreme object of worship was seen incarnated in a brute ? How must it be in pantheistic religions which rob the soul of all sense of a personal deity and leave morality and religion both to be the indigenous growth of man's own bad heart and bewildered mind ?

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For the production and development of that kind of character which is ideally good, and which practically in the average man represents any just conception of human virtue, Christianity alone, of all historical religions whatsoever, makes any adequate provision. The strongest argument in support of the Christian doctrine of regeneration, apart from the divine authority upon which it is declared, is the absolute necessity of all which that doctrine imports to the ends of human virtue, and to the efficiency of any ethical teaching, however perfect in itself. The words of Jesus to Nicodemus, " Ye must be born again," have the indorsement of man's moral history from the beginning. This it is which the ethical systems of paganism, however in their preceptive features or in their inculcation of specific virtues they may have approached Christianity, have always fatally lacked. The answering query of the master in Israel, " How can these things be ?" does indeed still linger on the lips of the doubting or the disbelieving ; perhaps will do so to the end of time. All the same does the moral history of mankind make it certain that no ethical teaching, however complete in itself, ever transforms human life save as humanity is itself transformed.